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SUBJECT: URI PARTY: RATS JUMP SHIP; CAN THEY SWIM?

REF: SEOUL 167

Classified By: A/POL Brian McFeeters. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Between January 23 and 28, four members of the Uri Party withdrew from the ruling Uri Party. Before the February 14 party convention, many others are expected to follow suit and abandon President Roh's party. With the withdrawal of National Assemblyman Im Jong-in on January 23, the exodus from the ruling Uri Party officially began. The four party-less lawmakers, the most prominent of whom is former Justice Minister Chun Jung-bae, all hope to form a new reform-minded party and galvanize the traditional Uri Party voter base to challenge the GNP in the presidential elections. Many traditional Uri voters now support one of the GNP candidates. The Uri Party, now 135 members strong (out of 296 in the National Assembly) must try to survive or cease to exist. End Summary

The Departure

¶2. (C) Im Jong-in, known as "Little GT" due to his fierce loyalty to Uri Party Chairman Kim Geun-tae, left the ruling party in a surprise announcement on January 23. He was followed on January 25 by reform-minded Reps Choi Jae-cheon and Lee Kae-an. Choi said that he hoped to lead a "creative destruction" of the Uri Party and Lee has told several sources that he hoped to emerge as a presidential candidate this fall. (Note: Lee ran unsuccessfully in the Uri Party primary for Mayor of Seoul in 2006. Despite representing a Seoul district, he received only single digit support and lost badly to Uri candidate Kang Geum-shil. End Note) Despite huge daily coverage of the defections, the Uri Party support has not risen in polls.

¶3. (C) While Im, Lee and Choi are all respected lawmakers, their political influence pales in comparison to former Justice Minister Chun Jung-bae, who withdrew from the party on January 28. As one of the key architects of the Uri Party and a former close advisor to President Roh, many accuse him of shirking his responsibility as a founder to reform the Uri Party from within. Chun, however, said he must leave in order to create a new party focused on future-oriented reform.

Next Wave?

¶4. (C) Former Roh stalwart Representative Yum Dong-youn was

the first to declare he would leave the party in early January, but he has yet to officially depart. In a meeting with poloff on January 12, Yum spoke as if he was already out of the party and was optimistic he could generate support for a new party. Most agree Yum is trying to get more attention and since he missed being the first to leave, there is no particular rush for him now to depart. In addition to Yum, there are several other reform-minded lawmakers who have indicated they will leave soon. However, more important will be the decisions by key leaders: former Uri Chairman Chung Dong-young is believed to control 40-50 lawmakers; and floor leader Kim Han-gill. Both have indicated they might leave the party before the February 14 convention taking many other Uri members with them.

Two Tests: Floor Leader Election and Party Convention

¶15. (C) The small group of about ten lawmakers who will likely leave, among them Reps. Choi and Chun, will likely not have an immediate impact on the Uri Party and they do not expect to form a new party until June. Their goal is to build support and establish a clear vision over the coming months. (Reftel A) However, the election of the floor leader on January 31 and the party convention on February 14 will be important tests of just how much, if any, organizational strength remains in the Uri Party.

Floor Leader Election

¶16. (C) Two lawmakers are running to replace Kim Han-gill as floor leader; moderate Lee Mi-kyoung and Kim Geun-tae loyalist Jang Young-dal. They are both respected lawmakers and enjoy support within the party. However, if a majority of lawmakers' votes are not obtained on January 31, neither would become floor leader. This could occur if, for example, only 100 of the 135 lawmakers show up to vote. Even if 100 members show up, 68 votes (a majority of the current Uri total) would be needed for victory. According to Uri sources, due to lack of internal support, this outcome is likely and would deal a serious blow to the party and Kim Han-gill would remain floor leader.

Party Convention February 14

¶17. (C) On February 14, at least 6,000 Uri Party members must get together to elect a new party chairman, decide the date and format of the presidential party and debate the future of the party. Most pundits speculate that 6,000 people would be almost impossible to assemble under previous party regulations where the 6,000 could be drawn from a limited pool of eligible delegates. Therefore, the party central committee agreed on January 29 to expand the pool of eligible participants in the February 14 convention. The Roh loyalists opposed the reform, but since the reform will make the survival of the party more likely, they agreed to go along.

Looking Toward December: Who Will Be The Candidate(s)?

¶18. (C) Due to the lack of any ruling party candidate with double digit support, there could be many presidential hopefuls who emerge in the next few months on the non-GNP ticket or tickets, from lawmakers (Chun Jung-bae, Lee Kae-an, Kim Geun-tae) to former lawmakers (Chung Dong-young) to outside hopefuls (Seoul National Professor Chung Un-chan, Lawyer and NGO leader Park Won-soon). Chung Un-chan, former Seoul National University President and possible reform candidate for president, told poloff on January 30 that neither Chun, GT nor Chung Dong-young (DY) have any chance for victory since they were the founding members of the Uri Party.

Comment

¶9. (C) According to most pundits and Assembly sources, the recent defections coupled with single digit popularity spell the end of the Uri Party before the December 19 presidential elections. With new party regulations, the party could avoid complete dissolution until the late spring or early summer, when new, non-GNP party(s) need to coalesce in order to have time to build support and organization before the official primary season begins in August or September. President Roh has tried to maintain control of the party by offering to leave the party, and he may well leave, but it appears he has no influence on the Uri members. As each Uri lawmaker decides whether to stay or leave, he or she is betting not just on the presidential elections, but also how to best position themselves for the April, 2008 Assembly elections, where all seats will be up for grabs. For now, four lawmakers have taken a bold first step - how far their initiative will take them remains to be seen.

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